

GODARD'S BRECHTIANISM

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Many things in Godard's cinematic style have been considered "Brechtian." In terms of editing, he constantly breaks the narrative flow by his lack of transitions, his tonal ruptures and contradictions, his ellipses, jump cuts, shot sequences, repetitions, and collages. He also plays off sequences that have a documentary interest, shot in long takes in recognizable outdoor locales, against those with highly artificial compositions--often shot with characters moving about indoors or with them facing the camera in static poses. Other shots serve the same function as Brechtian titles and back projections, summarizing the action and bringing in relevant information from the outside world of current events. These are the two-dimensional inserts in Godard's films. They consist of drawings, cartoons, pinups, photos, reproductions of art works, book and record jackets, ads, neon signs, Godard's writing across the image, and titles in block letters that are often flashed on the screen in syllables so as to create linguistic plays on words.

One of Godard's filmmaking characteristics that at first glance would not seem to be Brechtian is his propensity for improvisation and his insistence on utilizing chance moments seized at the instant of filming. However, through his editing technique, what may have been spontaneous in the shooting is presented to the spectator in a highly intellectualized form. In fact, Godard plays off a calculated editing against spontaneously seized images to provide a constant interrogation of how meaning is established and manipulated in film.

Both in the sound track and on visual track, Godard elicits reflection on various modes of discourse and on processes of communication--especially as these are seen in terms of class and sexual politics. He uses many visual and verbal elements that have a strong referential connection to the contemporary social world. These are used in a Brechtian way when they stimulate the audience

to reflect on the interrelation of artistic, linguistic, iconic, architectural, sexual, class, economic, and other social structures--both as we see them in the film and as we encounter them ourselves in the world at large. Godard imports intellectual ideas and comments on them in the context of his own films; he provokes the audience to consider how these ideas are used in their own environment. That Godard's content is political separates him from the rest of the cinematic avant garde. I will state this again: A Brechtian work must have a content which helps audiences to understand social process or history, and this content must at least be compatible with Marxism.

If I say that this content must at least be compatible with Marxism, certainly it is obvious to anyone familiar with Godard's work that there are certain apolitical and nihilistic tendencies in his work, strains which I see as often in conflict with or working against that strain which I shall call Brechtian, and some ^{of his films} are more Brechtian than others. In many of his films, the emphasis is on an alienated, idealistic, or sentimental hero. The theme may be a romantic one of the betrayal or the impossibility of love. Even after 1968, in films such as ONE PLUS ONE, Godard placed such an emphasis on "capturing the feeling of the present moment" that the film can hardly be seen as Brechtian. Before 1968, the films that are most Brechtian are VIVRE SA VIE, LES CARABINIERS, LA FEMME MARIÉE, MADE IN USA, DEUX OU TROIS CHOSES QUE JE SAIS D'ELLE, LA CHINOISE, WEEKEND, and LE GAI SAVOIR because they primarily aim to reveal and comment upon social process. Some films before 1968 which have idealistic heroes and sentimental themes also have Brechtian elements and moments of social critique; these would include LE MÉPRIS, BANDE À PART, ALPHAVILLE, and PIERROT LE FOU. And after 1968, most of the films are Brechtian except ONE PLUS ONE.

For a long time, Godard stood aloof from the political and intellectual turmoil in France in the fifties and early sixties. His political evolution

was gradual. From 1964 to 1967 within his films, he increasingly offered a political critique, and in his contact with producers and distributors, he became critical of the whole process of cinematic production as well. He moved from living out the role of the super-sensitive alienated genius in a world of pure cinema to denouncing the film industry and attacking French society from a leftist position in both public statements and in the context of his art. For years before he was a committed Marxist, Godard self-consciously used Brechtian techniques for their anti-illusionism and for social comment and critique. ^{He, like Brecht, developed a theory that certain artistic forms (e.g. melodrama) reinforced unconscious class interests, and he attacked these as bourgeois form.} Some other aspects of his work were also potentially Brechtian, although not necessarily so in their effect. These included such things as his fascination in portraying the externals of the Parisian petit-bourgeois milieu--which he shared with the other nouvelle vague filmmakers, and his penchant for quoting, aping film styles, and trying out various cinematic genres. What was potentially Brechtian here is that Godard did these things in an intellectualized way, implicitly commenting on and evaluating all the conventions used.

When France exploded in 1968, Godard was personally at the point where he could define his role as a filmmaker in specifically Marxist terms. And at that time in France, Brecht's writings had been translated, widely disseminated, and understood, especially in the light of the French Communist Party's cultural sterility throughout the fifties and repressive role in 1968. After 1968, Godard, making films with Jean-Pierre Gorin, collapsed both Brechtian aesthetic and political theory and film art into the same works. Films such as *BRITISH SOUNDS*, *VENT D'EST*, *PRAVDA*, and *LETTER TO JANE* incorporate as part of their content a Brechtian analysis of film use and especially of film form. Although these differ from the pre '68 films in their visual minimalism, Godard's assumption of a specifically Marxist aesthetic in 1968 did not mean a complete break with his earlier work insofar as that work was already Brechtian--already a

cinema with a radical social and political content that also made a break with bourgeois film form. However, the post '68 films are not only distanced in form, but are also theoretical essays about Marxist politics and aesthetics. They are also very topical in their political content. For this reason, these films do not appeal to a broad audience. Perhaps they cannot have an appeal except to a limited number of intellectual filmgoers. And it is in relation to their audience that Brecht and Godard differ most.

What differentiates Brechtian art works from other modernist or avant garde art works? In fact, some of the techniques I listed as Brechtian at the beginning of this paper are used in most avant garde and experimental films and were often favorite devices and tactics used by the surrealist filmmakers of the silent era in France. The Brechtianism of Godard's films finally depends on their political content and their political intent, which is to move the audience to social change. Godard's films are neither abstract, nor circular, nor do they negate the possibility of meaning or the distinction between true and false (as the distancing techniques do, for example, in Robbe-Grillet's *LE HOMME QUE* *MENT*). They do not celebrate ambiguity. We have all observed that in teaching or studying modernism, many teachers and critics get inside the work as in a game. They rely on an internal discussion of form or discuss how art reflects art or critiques past art. In reference to society, such studies usually refer to some idealistic and abstract notions of alienation, angst, anomie, the breakdown of modern civilization, the death of God, or the crisis of communication.

Although political meaning is distanced and refracted in Godard's Brechtian films, so that audiences themselves have to work out what his political concepts would mean in their own environment (there is no omniscient voice of God with the right answer), nevertheless Godard constantly manipulates, uses, refers to, and evaluates concepts from the social world outside the film. If we look back at Brecht's concept of the epic theater, we can see that time and

again he demanded that the play's form, the actors, the set, all aspects of the play reveal the dialectical movement of history, the class position of the characters, and the possibility for revolutionary change. Both a Marxist analysis and a Marxist methodology, he said, should be incorporated into political art. According to Brecht, a Marxist artist should make the fundamental contradictions that persist in society more readable for the audience; events should be shown in terms of their larger relation to society as a whole, and the Marxist artist should critique society's general state.

Much theoretical work has been done, especially in France since 1968, to analyze the mechanisms of realism and of narrative forms and also to show how the narrative arts have reinforced bourgeois cultural hegemony. Godard and Gorin have contributed a great deal to these theoretical explorations and to attack bourgeois form from a Marxist perspective. But all that is distanced in art is not radical politically, is not Marxist, and is certainly not Brechtian. Too often Brecht is invoked in too many ways. The term "Brechtian" should be limited to describe art works which not only attack bourgeois form but which facilitate a Marxist understanding of our social world.